

# Building a better work force through innovation

GOV. JANET NAPOLITANO COMMENTARY, East Valley Tribune

*Article Date: 07/22/07*

As a nation, the United States has led the world in scientific discoveries, inventions, education, economic growth - even sports. But as technology breaks down barriers and information flows freely across borders, over oceans and through continents, international competition has become fierce.

Our students no longer only compete with their peers in other states and close competitors, for American companies no longer fall exclusively between the Pacific and Atlantic shores. Innovators in Phoenix, Austin and Boston are not just challenged by one another, but by visionaries in Beijing, New Dehli, Dublin and Dubai.

How can America continue its dominance in this global economy? What can we do to sustain our competitive edge?

These are questions that I, as chair of the National Governors Association for the past year, along with leaders in academia and business, have sought to answer through my chair's initiative, Innovation America.

CHANGE FOR THE BETTER

Simply put, the answer is innovation and the solutions are found throughout our states - in our classrooms, laboratories, offices, state capitals and city halls.

From Arizona to New York and everywhere in between, each state has something to offer and as a nation, collectively, we have what it takes to propel ourselves into the 21st century global economy. Innovation America proposes a three-part plan to keep our country ahead of the competitive curve:

\* First, we must improve the rigor and relevance of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education in grades K-12 to ensure all students graduate from high school with the skills needed for a 21st century workforce of problem solvers, innovators and inventors. Governors agree that it's time to transform the current public education system from the ground up. We cannot continue to teach school the way we did 50 years ago. We must move away from rote memorization and start teaching understanding and analysis. We need technology embedded in our schools - to enhance learning and improve students' understanding of it. And we need to encourage more students to pursue careers in science and technology.

\* Next, we must better incorporate our higher education institutions - our public and private universities, state schools and community colleges - into the local economies they surround. Innovation America asks higher education to align its work, both the programs offered to students and research and development efforts, with the needs of the state's high-growth industries. It focuses on giving students the entrepreneurial skills they need, and the capacity to imagine and adapt to the unknown.

\* Finally, we must work with the private sector to develop an environment that fosters research and development, enhances innovation capacity and encourages entrepreneurship. By minimizing regulatory barriers, eliminating policies that inhibit the transfer of discoveries from the lab to the market, and creating tax policies that support the commercialization and growth of innovative industries, states can make a difference.

## LEADING THE WAY

America's governors are best positioned to lead the innovation charge.

Governors, at the state level, deal with these issues every day. States fund the majority of public education, and set graduation and teacher standards. States are the problem solvers and architects of policies that drive innovation. States are the engine for change and the impetus behind Innovation America. Together, along with business and academic leaders, governors can strengthen their states' innovative capacity and our ability to compete in a global economy.

That's really what Innovation America is about. It's focused on giving states the tools they need to make changes, and developing common sense, forward-looking solutions to the challenges we face. It's thinking through old and new challenges in fundamentally different ways. It's about getting the job done.

So, as my chairmanship of the National Governors Association comes to a close and as we move toward the next steps of an America that innovates, governors have asked and answered a key question affirmatively. Can the United States continue to succeed and thrive in the 21st century? Yes we can. America can and will compete and win with governors and states leading the way. That's how we put Innovation America to work.